

LONDON AS IT WAS, AND IS.*

We commence our present narrative at that period when London was threefold afflicted with the terrible calamities of famine, pestilence, and fire. In 1663, and for some years previous, there was a general dearth throughout England, wheat being sold at the enormous price of 3*l.* 1*s.* per quarter, and malt at 2*l.* 2*s.* This was succeeded by the plague in 1665, by whose direful ravages 68,596 persons were swept away, which, together with the number of those that died of other distempers, made the bill of mortality of this year amount to 97,306 souls. The recurrence of this dreadful calamity, after an interval of forty years, worked upon the superstition of the age, and many began to impute the fatality to that number, as if in that sense the land was to have rest only forty years. Many ingenious conjectures have been made concerning the origin of this scourge, and from all the facts that can be collected in modern times, there is every reason to believe that it originated with the hot, poisonous blasts of the deserts of Persia, Arabia, and Egypt, and travelling into Europe, it occasionally committed great ravages in the chief cities, and was never wholly eradicated therefrom. During the calamitous period we are now speaking of, it was observed by Dr. Baynard, a very intelligent physician, that there was a general calm and serenity of weather, as though both wind and rain had been expelled the kingdom, and that for many weeks together he could not discover the least breath of wind, not even so much as to move a weathercock, and the fires in the streets were made to burn with great difficulty; the birds too, as in tropical regions, flew heavily on the wing, panting for breath.

In the history of nations we find very often a singular coincidence of events, surpassing human comprehension, and appearing almost miraculous: London furnishes a remarkable illustration of this; a few months only had elapsed, the houses untenanted by the plague had scarcely been opened to the new comers from the country, than they were turned out again by a disaster more sudden than the former. The great fire of London, which happened in the year 1666, broke out Sept. 2nd, at one o'clock in the morning, in Pudding-lane (near now Fish-street), in a quarter of the town closely built with wooden, pitched houses, and made such rapid headway under a strong easterly wind then blowing, that before daylight it became too great for any hopes of mastering it by the engines, or even for approaching within any reasonable distance. Many attempts were made to prevent the spreading of it by pulling down houses and making great intervals; but the fire, seizing upon the timbers and rubbish, soon passed the spaces, and continued its devastating progress the whole of Monday and Tuesday. On Tuesday night the wind slackened a little, and the flames meeting with brick buildings at the Temple, began to lose their force gradually on that side, and on Wednesday a stop was put to it at the Temple Church, near Holborn-bridge, Pye-corner, Aldersgate, Cripplegate, near the end of Coleman-street, at the end of Basinghall-street, by the postern at the upper end of Bishopsgate-street and Leadenhall-street, and the Standard in Cornhill, at the Church in Fenchurch-street, near Clothworkers' Hall in Mincing-lane, at the middle of Mark-lane, and at the Tower Dock.

Thus, after raging three days with the utmost violence, and in despite of the feeble efforts of the inhabitants to check its progress, it gradually ceased, after having wasted and consumed the buildings on 436 acres of ground, 400 streets, lanes, &c., 13,000 houses, the cathedral church of St. Paul, 86 parish churches, 6 chapels, the magnificent buildings of Guildhall, the Royal Exchange, Custom-house, and Blackwell Hall, several hospitals and libraries, 52 of the companies' halls, and a vast number of other public edifices, 3 of the city gates, 4 stone bridges, and the prisons of Newgate, the Fleet, the Poultry and Wood-street Compters, the loss of which, together with that of merchandize and household furniture, by the best calculation amounting to ten millions seven hundred and thirty thousand pounds.

Without staying to inquire into the validity of the numerous reports handed down

to us concerning the origin of the fire, which in these days are truly placed to the prejudices and bigotry of the age, we will proceed at once to notice the permanent benefits derived by the inhabitants of London from what was then considered by them an irreparable calamity. Instead of very narrow, crooked, and inconmouss streets; dark, irregular, and ill-contrived wooden houses, with their several stories jutting out, or hanging over each other, whereby the circulation of the air was obstructed, noisome vapours produced, and destructive and noxious vermin harboured, the order of the King in Council declares that no man shall henceforth presume to erect any house or building, great or small, but of brick or stone, under penalty of having it pulled down; the cellars to be well arched, that Fleet-street, Chancery, Cornhill, and all other eminent and notorious streets shall be of sufficient breadth; that no lanes or alleys shall be erected but where absolutely necessary; that keys or wharfs be formed, and no house to be erected within so many feet of the river. Many superb edifices were erected; greater attention was paid to paving and lighting the streets, and had the plan of Sir Christopher Wren been carried out, many of our modern improvements would have followed.

The Building Act of 19 Car. II. determined that there be only four sorts of buildings, defined by the Act, the largest embracing noblemen's mansions, not to exceed four stories high; that all new buildings be built with stone or brick, with party walls; and three years were allowed, from the time of the conflagration, to rebuild the houses destroyed. All bricklayers, masons, plasterers, and joiners were to enjoy the privileges of freemen for seven years, or so long as the building was completing, and any exaction by them for material or labour was punished by fine or imprisonment. A spacious wharf 40 feet in breadth was also ordered to be erected from Tower-wharf to Temple-stairs, clear of all buildings other than cranes and sheds for the convenience of landing and preservation of merchandize; and for the more effectual preventing inundations, Thames-street and the ground between it and the river Thames to be raised 3 feet. And to enable the lord mayor and citizens to perform the stipulations of the Act, they were permitted to exact 1*s.* for every chaldron or ton of coals imported into the port of London. The exact width of many of the streets was defined by this Act.

Another order of council was shortly after issued to regulate the duty of surveyors, that special care be taken to preserve as far as possible uniformity in the lines of houses, the breast-summers ranging an equal height house with house; that encouragement be given to builders for ornament sake, the ornaments and projections of the front buildings to be of rubbed brick; that the signs be fixed against the balconies, instead of across the street as heretofore, &c. A tax of 6*s.* 8*d.* for every foundation was also levied for the surveyor. Rules and regulations were also laid down for paving and levelling the streets. Many other local acts followed for improving and beautifying the city. Sir John Evelyn's plan, as given in Maitland's History of London, would have greatly added to the beauty of the city.

From this time nothing of interest to the "builder" can be said to have taken place until 1703, when the metropolis was visited by a terrible tempest, which, lasting for eight hours, committed great devastation, destroying many spires and turrets, overturning houses, blowing down a vast number of trees and houses, and killing many people. The city was particularly afflicted by this visitation, scarcely a house escaping without damage, and the streets being literally filled with bricks, tiles, signs, bulks, and pent-houses, and many of the houses were wholly stripped of their roofs; some idea of the immense damage may be formed by the rise of tiles from one guinea to six pounds the thousand. The damage at sea exceeded that on land. Twelve men-of-war were lost, with above 800 men on board, and an immense number of merchant-ships, the Thames and sea-coasts being covered with wrecks. In 1709, in consequence of the vast increase of the city and suburbs, fifty new churches were ordered to be built, in or near the cities of London and Westminster, an additional duty of 2*s.* per chaldron being laid upon all coals and culm brought into the port

of London for the space of 137 days, and 3*s.* per ton for eight years afterwards. By the Act 2 Geo. I. cap. 28, in consequence of many contentions having arisen among neighbours concerning rebuilding their houses within the city and liberties, it was ordained, that if any person refused or neglected to build his share of a party-wall after due notice was given him, his next neighbour may build it for him, and oblige the person so neglecting it to pay the charges of rebuilding it; and that the water falling from the tops of houses, &c., should be conveyed into channels or kennels by pipes in the front or sides of the houses, on pain of twenty pounds penalty. In 1734, the city of London was lighted by 1,000 lamps only, the contractors paying the city the sum of 600*l.* annually for lighting the same. Every householder paying poor-rates being taxed 6*s.* per annum by the contractors, who were compelled to light only on dark nights till twelve o'clock from Michaelmas to Lady-day, excluding moonlight, or ten nights in every moon. In this year an alteration took place, a more equitable mode of lighting and taxing was imposed, and the number of lights was increased to 4,679. About this time the Fleet-ditch was covered in, and converted into a market. In 1738 the Mansion-house was built on the site of Stock-markets, the first pile was driven at Westminster-bridge, and the foundations of the Foundling Hospital were laid. In 1747 a great fire happened in Cornhill, by which 100 houses were burnt down, which had the usual effect of improving the appearance of the city. In 1750 the city was visited by an earthquake, but without any damage being done; it was sensibly felt in the cities of London and Westminster, Highgate, Hampstead, Greenwich, Richmond, &c.

In 1759 London within the Bills of Mortality consisted of 5,309 streets and 95,968 houses; of which 42,641 houses were insured in the Hand-in-Hand Fire-office, at 9,231,400*l.*, and 7,852 in the Westminster Fire-office, at 2,059,121*l.* The rents of the houses at a medium within the city and suburbs were estimated at 26*l.* 2*s.* 11*d.* each, or 2,509,163*l.* 3*s.* 7*d.* for the whole.

Having thus noticed every matter of interest to the builder connected with the vicissitudes and progressive improvements of London up to the present time, we shall conclude with a few remarks on its present condition. London now stands pre-eminent among nations; its progress in architectural improvements since 1814 is acknowledged even by foreigners to be marvellous; and the piles of buildings meeting the eye at every turn in the West-end, are unerring testimonials of the increasing wealth of its inhabitants, comparatively little affected by an enormous taxation, the result of a long-protracted war. Its proudest edifices are the results of individual enterprise, unaided by the government; for though the latter affects rivalry, it cannot hope to surpass the numerous monuments of individual enterprise with which this great metropolis is adorned: its docks, bridges, canals, the colleges and hospitals, theatres, clubs, palaces, picture-galleries, breweries, distilleries, and other public works. The inhabitants walk with pleasure the carefully-paved and well-regulated streets by day, and the illuminated streets by night, secured from violence by a well-regulated police; and an endless stream of wealth flowing in from all quarters of the globe, however unequally distributed, is still in some degree shared by all. "When," says the Marquis de Vermon, "I reflect on the variegated scenes which hourly draw my notice; when I add to my own observation those of others, on whose judgment I can rely; when I gaze upon this mighty metropolis, so rapidly augmenting in size and grandeur; when I recollect the high moral and military character which your arms attained in the last war; when, extending my views in literary and scientific subjects, I find that while the Duke of Wellington triumphed in the field, Dr. Jenner and Sir H. Davy were immortalizing both themselves and Great Britain by discoveries for which they will receive the blessings of ages yet unborn; and that Crabbe, Moore, Scott, and Byron, after raising the poetical fame of the country, still live, and will promise to carry higher their own and England's reputation; when I put all these contemporary circumstances together, I am enupelled, in spite of early prepossessions, to acknowledge that you are rapidly approach-